

Scotland's Third Sector



# GUIDE TO APPLYING ETHICAL RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

-  **NEED**
-  **INTEGRITY**
-  **ACCOUNTABILITY**
-  **CONFIDENTIALITY**
-  **SAFETY**

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# TSRF guide to applying ethical research principles

## Why this guide is needed

This guide meets a need identified by Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum (TSRF) for a resource to support research active third sector organisations to navigate ethical considerations. It is written for researchers working in the third sector to help you know what to do and how, to ensure your research participants and you are safe during the research process.

## How this guide came about

Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum, formed in 2009, has regular meetings and since 2014 has delivered events and conferences. The theme of these events has been third sector collaborative research. During many of the discussions the issue of ethical approaches has been a constant. Third sector organisations often have to rely on academic ethics committees or create a solution for themselves. In 2020 TSRF set up a subgroup to explore how we might help third sector organisations more easily think through and address ethical considerations in research and this resource is the product of their work.

## Introduction

Having a set of principles is at the heart of making good ethical decisions about how to undertake your research. Here we set out some research principles and checklists to help you think about how to ensure your research process will keep both participants and researchers safe. Following these principles will give you the confidence that you will be able to justify the decisions you've made in how to conduct your research to your organisation, to research participants, to people reading the findings and to funders. It will demonstrate you have considered how to undertake good research practice and are satisfied that you have done your best to conduct ethical research.

This guide may not cover everything you need to consider. You will need to apply the principles to whatever context you are working in, whether face to face or online.

If you are commissioning research the principles will help you make decisions about whether the research has been given ethical consideration. You may want to include the principles in a tender document.

Please note in some circumstances existing national ethics committees may be required to be used. For example, research undertaken for the NHS are required to go through their ethics procedures.

## Who are these research principles for?

The aim of these principles is to support anyone in the third sector to plan research. You may be a lone researcher or in a team of researchers working in the third sector, or a peer researcher, co-producing the research. These are general principles which can be adapted to particular situations and service users; they are not dependent on size, type or subject area of the organisation.

## Terminology

Researcher/s – We have used this term to mean the person undertaking the research.

## Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum Research Principles

Our core principles are:



### **Need**

Research should only be carried out where there is a clear evidence of need for the research



### **Integrity**

Research should have integrity and be undertaken in an honest, open, and respectful way



### **Accountability**

The researcher and the organisation undertaking or commissioning the research should be accountable to participants and stakeholders



### **Confidentiality**

Research should ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants



### **Safety**

The researcher and the organisation should ensure the safety and wellbeing of both participants and researcher

## Explanation of principles, things to consider to comply with each and practice examples

### 1. Research should only be carried out where there is a clear evidence of need for the research

You should undertake research where there is a clear practical value, such as where it helps organisations to find evidenced based ways of providing services or meeting its mission.

You should be able to articulate why the research is being undertaken, what the benefit will be to participants, the organisation, and researchers.

You may be working with communities that maybe considered 'over consulted'. You should be diligent about the value added by further research at the same time as giving opportunities for participants to decide whether that want to participate. You should explore whether there is existing research that answers your questions and seek not to replicate research unnecessarily.



#### Questions to consider

- Why is this research being proposed?
- What is the need for this research?
- What do you want to know? What is the research question?
- What are you hoping will change because of this research?
- Will the proposed research answer your need/question?
- Is there existing research which will tell you what you want to know?
- What potential benefits exist for the research participants and the community?
- What potential harm could be caused to participants?

### 2. Research should have integrity and be undertaken in an honest, open, and respectful way

Third sector research should be of good quality and done by skilled and knowledgeable staff. Research findings should be honest, impartial, and supported by the evidence. You should ensure you manage participants' expectations of the likely consequences of the research i.e. not promising a particular result or provision of service/funding as a result of the research.

You should involve participants in each stage of the process from planning to dissemination. Participants should know the findings of the research before they

are published and be able to withdraw any of their quotes and know the process to do this and when.

Participants should be recruited voluntarily and be fully informed in a suitable format about the nature and method of the research before consenting to participate. This should include timeframes. When working with children and vulnerable adults care should be taken to ensure this is done appropriately, that the research and implications in participating are understood fully and they have the capacity to give consent. There should be no deception. Participants should have clear information about how to withdraw from the research.

The research should be mutually beneficial. This includes finding appropriate ways to give immediate benefit to participants. This may mean giving vouchers of the participant's choice, providing the participant with opportunities to gain skills or knowledge, or giving value and respect to participants by giving them information and acknowledging their efforts by thanking them and appreciating the time they have given. You may decide to pay participants in cash. If you do, be sure that you have explored the ramifications i.e. there may be implications for people receiving benefits.

You should ensure that participants are aware for whom the research is being done i.e. organisation/institute, who the researcher is and their qualifications, and any particular position/school of thought they may take.

You should be aware of the potential for you to be regarded by participants as those that hold the power. It is important that you reflect on the power dynamics that may exist between yourself and the participant and should have systems to balance the power. For example, this may include the time and location of the research interview, the terminology and language used, the appearance of the researcher and the identities of the researcher and participants (for example, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socio-economic background).

Sharing power may also involve giving participants choices. Researchers should reflect on getting the right balance between protecting participants and making assumptions about what they can and cannot do without testing those first.



### Practice examples:

**YouthLink Scotland** provides training for participants which will help in future study or employment

**Poverty Alliance** reimburses research participants with vouchers

**Waverley Care** expects participants to directly benefit in some way from the research process. They reimburse research participants with a cash payment where possible and when it is not possible to provide financial reimbursement, researchers should provide reimbursement in-kind, for example, providing participants with practical assistance to access services or to meet other needs.



## Questions to consider

- Does the person doing the research have the appropriate skills and knowledge to undertake the research? i.e. technical research skills, interpersonal skills and relevant knowledge of the client group. If you are commissioning the research have you seen sample/s of their previous work?
- How will you ensure when recruiting participants for research that they understand what's involved and are giving informed consent?
- How will participants be involved or consulted at planning and throughout the research process?
- How will you communicate with participants throughout the research?
- How will you share draft research findings with participants?
- Have you made it clear how participants can withdraw from involvement in the research? (and what is your process for removing their data and how will you communicate to participants what will happen to their data?)
- Can you demonstrate that you have thought about the benefits to participants and can give reasons for your choice?
- What are your expectations of participants? How much time will participants be asked to give to the project? Are you being respectful and honest about the commitment you expect?
- Will your research and its findings be reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?
- Will all contributions to the research be acknowledged?

### 3. The researcher and the organisation undertaking or commissioning the research should be accountable to participants and stakeholders

You and your organisation should take responsibility and be held to account to participants and stakeholders to produce robust and rigorous research. Researchers should do what they say they will and keep participants informed.

You should choose research methods that are safe and do no harm, physically, psychologically, or emotionally, to either the participants or themselves.

You should be considerate when asking for sensitive information and to the impact of their research, only gathering information that is needed to answer the research question. Third sector organisations should ensure that researchers are aware of sensitive issues and take measures to ensure questions are asked in a sensitive way.

There is an ethical imperative to use data collected, or the corollary; you should not collect data that you won't be able to use.

You should maintain the reputation of research and the organisation you are working for.



### Questions to consider

- What systems do you have in place to ensure that researchers are supported and supervised?
- What systems do you have in place to ensure that good research practice is being adhered to? For example, how will you ensure your data analysis is impartial?
- How will you judge if the research has been undertaken with rigour and is robust?
- If you work with service users who may be sensitive to a subject or certain question, how do you plan to mitigate the potential harm that may be caused?
- Are your chosen research methods safe for participants and the researcher?

## 4. Research should ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants

You should seek informed consent to participate. Participants should be anonymous. You should be respectful of participants' confidentiality. This means being clear with participants about the terms of confidentiality, and when and how these may be broken.

However, there are times when anonymity is not possible because of the research population. For example, if the research involves senior Scottish Government officials, by the nature of the answers, anonymity may not be possible. If anonymity cannot be ensured, there must always be informed consent and you must be able to demonstrate that this action will not put the person consenting at risk.

If your organisation is working with vulnerable people you will need to think in what circumstances you may break confidentiality e.g. if you identify that the participant may be subject to harm from themselves or other people. There is a legal obligation to report specific types of illegal activity, such as terrorism and money laundering. As an organisation you will have to decide your position regarding other illegal activity and how you will deal with this if disclosed<sup>1</sup>.

If you are working with clients who may have decreased capacity, for example people with dementia, to give informed consent then you will need to think how your research can ethically be carried out.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see <https://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/Research-Involving-illegal-activities.pdf>

If you are working with children, you will need to have systems in place to ensure that a child gives informed consent or if more appropriate a parent gives permission for a child's participation. This means having age appropriate participant information for children including when and how confidentiality may need to be broken, for example when there has been a disclosure of abuse.

You should have a clear understanding of your research population and know the key needs of the population you are working with. You should ensure that your practice is inclusive and accessible.

You should think through issues of consent throughout the research from recruitment to dissemination of research findings. You should consider legacy issues and clearly make participants aware of any issues i.e. how will participants feel about their participation in the research in 10 years' time or if there circumstances change?

You should set up systems to collect and store information confidentially, adhering to GDPR. Participants should be informed before consent is obtained about ownership of the data and how their information will be safe; how it is collected and stored including what format i.e. notes, audio or video recordings, how long it will be used for and kept, and when it will be destroyed, and what will happen to their data if they choose to withdraw from the research at any time up to publication. Be specific at what point a participant cannot withdraw their information. If other people apart from the researcher will see or have access to the data, you should include this in the participant information.

You have a responsibility to inform participants about how the research findings will be reported and how quotes will be used to ensure anonymity. You should explain what happens if participants do not agree with the findings. Participants do not need to agree with the findings but need to agree that they are fairly represented.

Be aware of keeping anonymity when you present your findings e.g. on a statistical table of results where there are fewer than 5 in combinations you may be able to work out who a person is especially, for example if you were reporting on rare characteristics.

"Care should be taken when reporting analyses with small samples, as some outputs can lead to information about individual participants being shared unintentionally. Where this is a risk, you should consider applying the principles of statistical disclosure control.(1)" [Disclosure control - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Also, you should take care to be balanced when presenting your findings. For example, if you say an area is deprived you label everyone in that area as deprived which they may not agree with.



## Practice examples:

### **DRILL**

If a project participant appears in poor mental health or is potentially suicidal, grantees should do their best to ensure that, with the explicit consent of the participant, they are put in touch with appropriate services.

### **Waverley Care**

Unless the participant or another person is at immediate or significant risk of harm, we do not believe researchers should disclose illegal activity, if told about this in the course of carrying out research. An exception to this would be cases where there is a legal obligation to report specific types of illegal activity, such as terrorism and money laundering.

### **Poverty Alliance**

Poverty Alliance researchers take an example of a research report to show a participant before an interview so that they can show how reports are written and how quotes are anonymised.



## Questions to consider

- What is your process for obtaining informed consent?
- How will you inform participants about what consent means and what to consider before giving consent?<sup>2</sup>
- How will you ensure confidentiality or anonymity for participants?
- How will you ensure your data collection is ethical? How will data, including electronic data, be stored securely and for how long?
- What will happen to the research data after the project is completed?
- Will your research comply with all legal requirements?
- Who will have access to the research data during the project?
- How will you ensure that your findings are reported and disseminated in ethical ways?
- Can you demonstrate that the researcher is GDPR trained or familiar with GDPR guidance?

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<sup>2</sup> [This short film](#) from Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) is an example a way to give clear information about informed consent. For more information about this project see [this blog](#) The practical, methodological and ethical dimensions of interviewing at a distance

## 5. Researcher and the organisation should ensure the safety and wellbeing of both participants and researcher

You should ensure that the rights of everyone participating in the research are always respected.

You should ensure the physical, social or psychological wellbeing of the participant is not adversely affected by the research process and sensitive to the risks of their participant population, particularly if working with vulnerable people and children, and ensure their safety. This means having systems to identify and mitigate issues including online safety if this is deemed a risk. If working online with a participant be aware that there may be different issues to consider. For example, if you are interviewing a person in their home they may be overheard which may put them in danger.

You should do a risk assessment including mitigation actions. Consider if you need to set up access to support for participants and how you do this. For example, following an interview which may bring up issues for the participant which are distressing. The delivery of support may differ depending on whether the research was conducted in person or online.

You should follow the safeguarding procedures you follow for service deliver and meet your legal responsibilities and standards. You should have an enhanced disclosure to work with children or vulnerable people before you start your research. The process can take some time so ensure you plan for this.

The employing or contracting organisation should be responsible for the wellbeing of the researcher. This means putting systems in place to identify potential wellbeing concerns that the researcher may be exposed to and steps to mitigate.

Specific safety issues may arise from the specific nature of the research, participants, or environment. As this guide is being written the world is facing a pandemic from coronavirus. This will have bearing on how the research is undertaken and therefore there may be specific requirements of the behaviour of researcher and participants to keep safe and to adhere to government restrictions.

We advise you refer to [UKRIO Recommended Checklist for Research Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

This resource outlines the general ethical principles for research and has not detailed ethical considerations for specific types of research. For example, participatory research carries its own ethical challenges. For more information see [University of Durham ethics guide](#) which addresses ethical issues that arise in research that is community-based and participatory.



## Practice example

### University of Birmingham

**Ethical Compass** - The ethical compass raises issues of disparities of power and influence, urging a consideration of how the voices of those who are most affected by emergencies can be meaningfully included in deciding what research takes place, where, and how. Read more about the Ethical Compass in [Kayleigh Garthwaite's blog](#): Researching poverty in the pandemic: thinking through ethical issues and challenges.



## Questions to consider

- If the researchers might encounter unsafe or risky situations whilst conducting the research, what arrangements will be made to keep them safe?
- Have you done a risk assessment about risks to wellbeing of participants and researcher?
- Have you put support in place to be accessed if needed? You may get this through working with a partner organisation or agency?
- If you are working with children or vulnerable people do you have an enhanced disclosure?
- Have you taken specific consideration to the environment that the research is being conducted in i.e. during COVID-19?
- Is the research taking account of local COVID-19 restrictions and how these affect your research processes and participants?

## How to put these principles in practice

Once you have considered all the principles, written your research proposal and checked off the checklists you may want to ask someone else to scrutinise your ethical decisions and identify any gaps.

A few third sector organisations have their own 'ethics committees', some may have formal or informal partnerships with academics however if this is not the case you may want to set up an informal arrangement with another third sector organisation or group to peer review your research proposal. If commissioning research it may be helpful to include a person specification for a researcher with the research proposal.

Third sector organisations may consider setting up their own advisory group.



## Practice examples:

**Poverty Alliance** set up an informal network of a few third sector organisations and academics that meets every other month to peer review each other's research and to discuss ethical issues.

**Waverley Care** has consulted academics to set up an in-house ethics committee. They have produced a pack of information including principles, application forms and information for participants and researchers.

**DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning)** has an ethics committee and accompanying paperwork for DRILL projects to access and adhere to.

**Cattanach** has set up an advisory panel for their Children's research.

Cattanach, in partnership with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, is organising a conference in 2021 with the aim of demonstrating to several important Scottish stakeholders the value of childhood in its own right, rather than merely as a stepping-stone to adulthood. A key aspect of the event will be a series of the children's research events preceding and informing it, with Children in Scotland commissioned to lead this work. These children's events aim to use creative methods to meaningfully engage children from 0 to 7, in order to feed back to the adults what really matters to them. An Advisory Board of global experts on early years engagement has been coordinated, to provide their knowledge and oversight to Children in Scotland, to support them in capturing the children's perspectives in the most cutting-edge ways. Our first meeting gave an excellent insight into the diverse and innovative methods being developed to truly understand the rich inner worlds of young children we have so much more to learn about.

## References

DRILL <http://www.drilluk.org.uk/>

Garthwaite, Kayleigh et al, University of Birmingham, 2020, Blog: [Researching poverty in the pandemic: thinking through ethical issues and challenges](#) (accessed 5.1.21)

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[University of Durham, Ethics in community-based participatory research](#) webpage (accessed 16.12.20)

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UKRIO, 2008, Recommended Checklist for researchers [www.ukrio.org](http://www.ukrio.org) (accessed 20.10.20) This document is an extract from [UKRIO Code of Practice for Research: Promoting good practice and preventing misconduct](#),

UKRIO, October 2020, [Recommended Checklist for Research Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

UCL Research Ethics Policy Note RESEARCH INVOLVING ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES <https://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/forms/Research-Involving-illegal-activities.pdf>

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## Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum

Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum brings together third sector, academic and public sector partners to:

- promote and share research about and from the third sector
- encourage the use of third sector research to improve policy and practice
- produce resources and deliver events to support third sector researchers and encourage collaboration with academic partners

For more information about the Forum please visit the TSRF webpages

<https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/tsrf/>

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### **TSRF resources:**

Evidence for success: The guide to getting evidence and using it (2015)

Collaborating with academics (2016)

Evidence from elsewhere: Gathering, analysing and using other people's evidence (2017)

These and other TSRF resources can be downloaded from

<https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/tsrf/tsrf-resources/>

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